

Remarks at a United Nations Ministerial Meeting on Sudan in New York City
September 24, 2010

Good afternoon. Mr. Secretary-General, on behalf of us all, thank you for convening this meeting to address the urgent situation in Sudan that demands the attention of the world.

At this moment, the fate of millions of people hangs in the balance. What happens in Sudan in the days ahead may decide whether a people who have endured too much war move towards peace or slip backwards into bloodshed. And what happens in Sudan matters to all of sub-Saharan Africa and it matters to the world.

I want to thank Vice President Taha and First Vice President Kiir for being here. To my fellow leaders from Africa, the Middle East, Europe, and Asia, your presence sends an unmistakable message to the Sudanese people and to their leaders that we stand united. The comprehensive peace agreement that ended the civil war must be fully implemented. The referenda on self-determination scheduled for January 9th must take place peacefully and on time. And the will of the people of south Sudan and the region of Abyei must be respected, regardless of the outcome.

We are here because the leaders of Sudan face a choice. It's not the choice of how to move forward to give the people of Sudan the peace they deserve. We already know what needs to be done. The choice is—for Sudanese leaders is whether they will have the courage to walk the path. And the decision cannot be delayed any longer.

Despite some recent progress, preparations for the referenda are still behind schedule. Now the vote is only a little more than a hundred days away. And tragically, as has already been referred to, a recent spike in violence in Darfur has cost the lives of hundreds of more people.

So the stakes are enormous. We all know the terrible price paid by the Sudanese people the last time north and south were engulfed in war: some 2 million people killed—2 million people; millions more left homeless; millions displaced to refugee camps, threatening to destabilize the entire region. Separately, in Darfur, the deaths of hundreds of thousands shocked the conscience of the world. This is the awful legacy of conflict in Sudan, the past that must not become Sudan's future.

And that is why since I took office, my administration has worked for peace in Sudan. In my meetings with world leaders, I've urged my counterparts to fully support and contribute to the international effort that is required. Ambassador Susan Rice has worked tirelessly to build a strong and active coalition committed to moving forward. My special envoy, General Gration, has worked directly with the parties in his 20 visits to the region.

Now, we've seen some progress. With our partners, we've helped to bring an end to the conflict between Sudan and Chad. We've worked urgently to improve humanitarian conditions on the ground. And we're leading the effort to transform the Sudan People's Liberation Army into a professional security force, including putting an end to the use of children as soldiers.

Recognizing that southern Sudan must continue to develop and improve the lives of its people, regardless of the referendum's outcome, we in the U.N. mission are helping the Government of southern Sudan improve the delivery of food and water and health care and strengthen agriculture.

And most recently, we've redoubled our efforts to ensure that the referenda takes place as planned. Vice President Biden recently visited the region to underscore that the results of the referenda must be respected. Secretary Clinton has engaged repeatedly with Sudanese leaders to convey our clear expectations. We've increased our diplomatic presence in southern Sudan, and mobilized others to do the same, to prepare for the January 9th vote and for what comes after.

But no one can impose progress and peace on another nation. Ultimately, only Sudanese leaders can ensure that the referenda go forward and that Sudan finds peace. There's a great deal of work that must be done, and it must be done quickly.

So two paths lay ahead: one path taken by those who flout their responsibilities and for whom there must be consequences—more pressure and deeper isolation; the other path is taken by leaders who fulfill their obligations, and which would lead to improved relations between the United States and Sudan, including supporting agricultural development for all Sudanese, expanding trade and investment, and exchanging ambassadors and eventually working to lift sanctions—if Sudanese leaders fulfill their obligations.

Now is the time for the international community to support Sudanese leaders who make the right choice. Just as the African nations of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development rose to the challenge and helped the parties find a path to peace in 2005, all of us can do our part to ensure that the comprehensive peace agreement is fully implemented.

We must promote dignity and human rights throughout all of Sudan, and this includes extending the mandate of the U.N. independent expert of Sudan, because we cannot turn a blind eye to the violations of basic human rights. And as I said, regardless of the outcome of the referenda, we must support development in southern Sudan, because people there deserve the same dignity and opportunities as anyone else.

And even as we focus on advancing peace between north and south, we will not abandon the people of Darfur. The Government of Sudan has recently pledged to improve security and living conditions in Darfur, and it must do so. It need not wait for a final peace agreement. It must act now to halt the violence and create the conditions—access and security—so aid workers and peacekeepers can reach those in need and so development can proceed. Infrastructure and public services need to be improved. And those who target the innocent—be they civilians, aid workers, or peacekeepers—must be held accountable.

Progress towards a negotiated and definitive end to the conflict is possible. And now is the moment for all nations to send a strong signal that there will be no time and no tolerance for spoilers who refuse to engage in peace talks.

Indeed, there can be no lasting peace in Darfur and no normalization of relations between Sudan and the United States without accountability for crimes that have been committed. Accountability is essential not only for Sudan's future, it also sends a powerful message about the responsibilities of all nations that certain behavior is simply not acceptable in this world, that genocide is not acceptable. In the 21st century, rules and universal values must be upheld.

I saw the imperative of justice when I visited one of the camps in Chad several years ago. It was crowded with more than 15,000 people, most of them children. What I saw in that camp was heartbreaking: families who had lost everything, surviving on aid. I'll never forget the man who came up to me, a former teacher who was raising his family of nine in that camp. He looked at me, and he said very simply, "We need peace." We need peace.

Your Excellencies—Vice President Taha, First Vice President Kiir—the Sudanese people need peace. And all of us have come together today because the world needs a just and lasting peace in Sudan.

Here, even as we confront the challenges before us, we can look beyond the horizon to the different future that peace makes possible. And I want to speak directly to the people of Sudan, north and south. In your lives, you have faced extraordinary hardship. But now there's the chance to reap the rewards of peace. And we know what that future looks like. It's a future where children, instead of spending the day fetching water, can go to school and come home safe. It's a future where families, back in their homes, can once again farm the soil of their ancestors. It's a future where, because their country has been welcomed back into the community of nations, more Sudanese have the opportunity to travel, more opportunity to provide education, more opportunities for trade. It's a future where, because their economy is tied to the global economy, a woman can start a small business, a manufacturer can export his goods, a growing economy raises living standards, from large cities to the most remote village.

This is not wide-eyed imagination. This is the lesson of history, from Northern Ireland to the Balkans, from Camp David to Aceh, that with leaders of courage and vision, compromise is possible and conflicts can be ended. And it is the example of Africans, from Liberia to Mozambique to Sierra Leone, that after the darkness of war, there can be a new day of peace and progress.

So that is the future that beckons the Sudanese people, north and south, east and west. That is the path that is open to you today. And for those willing to take that step, to make that walk, know that you will have a steady partner in the United States of America.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:37 p.m. at United Nations Headquarters. In his remarks, he referred to Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon of the United Nations; Vice President Ali Osman Taha and First Vice President Salva Kiir Mayardit of Sudan; U.S. Special Envoy to Sudan Maj. Gen. J. Scott Gration, USAF (Ret.); and Mohamed Chande Othman, United Nations independent expert on the situation of human rights in Sudan.

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